New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1950

Volume XI, Number 19 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of October 2, 1950

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Theatre Openings

"Black Chiffon" "Season in the Sun"
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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK TIMES

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*Yearly Subscription $25.00**

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, INC., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"Season in the Sun"

The New York Times

September 29, 1950

'Season in the Sun,' Wolcott Gibbs' Comedy With Fire Island as Setting, Bows at the Cort

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since Wolcott Gibbs is a drama critic, he naturally knows more about life than most people and can express himself more eloquently. That is obviously the reason why his "Season In the Sun" is a vastly amusing light comedy that makes a lot of sense and ought to keep open house at the Cort for a long time.

Using Fire Island for his setting, Mr. Gibbs has written the story of an expert paragrapher for The New Yorker who decides to reform and become a profound novelist. Having not only a sense of humor but a sense of proportion, Mr. Gibbs knows that that is an unreal situation, and that nobody can escape his own period or environment.

* * *

"Season In the Sun" is therefore the hilarious chronicle of a sensitive young magazine writer with an excellent family who furiously turns on the dipsomaniacs and screwballs with whom he normally associates. Toward the end of the evening Mr. Gibbs restores his writer to the disorderly environment that he deserves, and the curtain comes down soon after his editor has, rather surprisingly, made a sensible speech about the advantages of belonging to human society.

If that suggests that "Season In the Sun" is a philosophical comedy, Mr. Gibbs would be entitled to denounce it as calumny. For his antic beside the ocean is amiably composed of the idle characters who drift along the boardwalk and on to the porch, the insane conversations they have and the crackbrained explosions of temperament. At a guess, half his play is irrelevant. But the quality that distinguishes "Season In the Sun" from manufactured comedies is the fact that it grows out of people. Mr. Gibbs is not stringing jokes together or setting the trap for wisecracks. He is writing with wit, drollery and humor about modern people caught up in the fever of modern times.

* * *

He ought to be grateful to his actors and director. "Season In the Sun" may be set down as a perfectly cast comedy that Burgess Meredith has succeeded in directing with great finesse. Richard Whorf gives his best performance as the startled writer. He is as dead-pan, astonished and skeptical the author of the play. As the wife, Nancy Kelly is not only gratifyingly attractive, but she acts the part with illuminating emphasis and decision.

The minor parts are played as brilliantly as the major ones. As the irascible but shrewd editor of this comic magazine, Anthony Ross gives an astonishingly incisive performance. As the chief representative of respectability, Eddie Mayehoff is triumphantly boring and something of a genius at making dullness uproarious. Paula Laurence gives her funniest performance as the madame of a celebrated New York bordello.

* * *

Since Mr. Gibbs has betrayed the Critics Circle by not raising the opening-night curtain until 8:30, there is unfortunately no time to salute properly the other actors—Joan Diener as the disingenuous blonde who breaks up families for fun; King Calder as an amiable and profligate journalist; Grace Valentine as a gusty local landlady with a distaste for brilliant New York society; Charles Thompson as a drunken handy-man. In case anyone is inadvertently omitted from this list, he is directed to take a bow for himself with this column's full approval.

After prowling around Fire Island all summer, Boris Aronson has designed an inviting beach cottage that not only is fine to look at but gives the actors a background that helps them and plenty of space to work in. Altogether, "Season In the Sun" is a happy occasion. Mr. Gibbs has spared his colleagues considerable embarrassment by writing an original and funny play that is also intelligent.

"SEASON IN THE SUN"

Comedy by Wolcott Gibbs; staged by Burgess Meredith; setting by Boris Aronson; costumes by Natalie Barth Walker; presented by Courtney Burr and Malcolm Pearson at the Cort Theatre, September 28, 1950. The cast:

Billy Crane.....Eugene Steiner
Marcia Crane..Kathy Chapman
George Crane...Richard Whorf
Emily Crane.....Nancy Kelly
Mae Jermyn...Grace Valentine
Charles Farber....George Ives
Michael Lindsey...Jack Weston
Paul Anderson..Eddie Mayehoff
Virginia Anderson..Doreen Lang
Deedy Barton.....Joan Diener
John Colgate.....King Calder
Molly Burden...Paula Laurence
Arthur Dodd.....Anthony Ross
Will Quigley..Charles Thompson
Messenger Boy..Stanley Martin

Synopsis: The action of the play takes place on the front porch of a summer bungalow on Fire Island, N.Y. The time is the present. Act I. An afternoon in early September. Act II. Late the following afternoon. Act III. Scene 1. About 1 o'clock the following morning. Scene 2. About 10 o'clock that morning.

New York World-Telegram and The [illegible] Sun

September 29, 1950

Season in the Sun' Is Laugh-Getter

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Decided comedy.
Theme—Professional integrity.
Issue—A failing sense of humor.
Mood—Hilarious beyond words.
I find it—A sophisticated uproar.

Wolcott Gibbs and a knowing crew of assistants have set an extremely high standard in the field of comedy with "Season in the Sun." It starts off at such a wild pace of laughter that after a little while you begin to resent it if there are no jokes for 90 seconds or so.

Naturally that kind of thing can't go on, nor would you want it to. You begin to settle for an occasional stretch of quite reasonable, serious conversation. Fortunately, right up to the end, though, you never have to wait long for another outburst of wild humor.

Wayward Writer.

A writer, obviously on the New Yorker, has come out of an auto accident bent on a new life. In time his behavior is most reasonably blamed on low vitality. Meanwhile, he quits his job to write some noble and starchy tripe, while he snubs his old friends and goes on the wagon with a moralizing vengeance.

He first bores his wife, then offends her mortally and all but loses her before a violent hangover and an observant editor bring him to his senses.

The play involves a great deal of inferential comment about the New Yorker, and about Fire Island, where it takes place. You will likely hear a lot of talk that this makes the play special. I would suggest that you consider such talk superficial snobbery. I have met but one editor of the New Yorker (the playwright), and have not been on Fire Island since 1933, and I got every joke I could hear.

I would go even further, and bet that the members of the audience last night, so many of whom were clearly in the know, were laughing a lot more at things they recognized than things that were meant to amuse. Since they drowned out a lot of what looked like good gags, the play will probably be even funnier from now on.

Warm Comedy.

Maybe we should rein up the enthusiams here and state that "Season in the Sun" is not earth shaking, not particularly significant of anything, and not, for instance, a "Born Yesterday." It is recognizable and comic and warm because it blasts hypocrisy and sets some nice, bright people back on their feet.

If it weren't for an endlessly protracted worrying of a moderate joke at the close of the second act, I'd have scarce fault to find.

Richard Whorf writhes in colorful comic indignation as the writer. He is a mellow drunk, but he wears a mighty hangover with fearsomely humorous results.

It is usually fatal to be right, on the stage. Nancy Kelly is, here, and remarkably enough wins your complete sympathy and holds it. The wife she plays is graceful and deserving of deep affection.

Happy Cast.

The play is studded with happy characters, played to the hilt by a group of performers happily in their element. Anthony Ross is the choleric editor and King Calder is a roving journalist. Paula Laurence is a philosophical madame and Eddie Mayehoff a stuffy prig.

Of the rest, my favorites are Grace Valentine as a sandy landlady, and Charles Thompson as an alcoholic handyman.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
September 29, 1950

By HOWARD BARNES

Real Adult Comedy

WOLCOTT GIBBS, the perceptive drama critic of "The New Yorker," has turned his hand deftly and sardonically to playwriting. His "Season in the Sun," at the Cort, is a glittering comedy of manners, with more than a little substance beneath its satirical surface. Cast to perfection, with Richard Whorf and Nancy Kelly in starring roles, and vigorously staged by Burgess Meredith, it is rich in wit, wisdom and laughter. It does not always hang together, based as it is on a series of anecdotal sketches from the author's book of the same name, but it is elegant theater. Gibbs, the reviewer, has given other reviewers a chance to salute him as a dramatist.

• • •

An analyst of stage craftsmanship is always suspected of not being able to do the things he judges. In this instance a fine writer demonstrates anew that spinning words together is a gift that is applicable to many forms. The dialogue of "Season in the Sun" is right as rain as Gibbs surveys the particular world he has lived in from a Fire Island beach house. The characters are full-bodied and have more guts than a somewhat sarcastic treatment might have predicated. And the situations, while highly specialized, as they should have been, have a strong common denominator with contemporary existence. The chief virtue of this first comedy is that it is funny.

• • •

It is the humor which carries "Season in the Sun" through its rather shapeless plot. It is at its lustiest when strange characters, from mincing males to a bordello proprietress invade the bungalow where a reformed paragrapher for a weekly is aggressively on the wagon and bent on writing a novel of disillusionment. There are acid portraits of dull, substantial people and a wryly affectionate characterization of a gruff editor who resembles for all the world Harold Ross of "The New Yorker." Meanwhile, the rapier-like phrases define the near split-up of a marriage, which is the chief cohesive theme in the work.

• • •

Since it is obviously in large part autobiographical, Gibbs has had quite a time depicting himself. Whorf plays the rebellious chronicler, who thinks for a time that life is braver for a teetotaler, with a fine flourish. His wild impatience with bums is beautifully countered by his wonderful nonsense, when a stuffy Princeton classmate and a solicitous nymph who wants to help him write his book drive him to the bottle. Miss Kelly is splendid as a patient wife who doesn't care whether her man drinks or doesn't, but insists that he be honest with himself.

Then there are Anthony Ross, doing a brilliant impersonation of the Ross to whom he is not related; King Calder as a breezy newspaper man; Paula Lawrence as the lady with a questionable business and Eddie Mayehoff giving an uproarious performance as the stuffed shirt. Meredith has kept the fragments of scenes correlated and has kept the amusement clipping and the production is immaculate, even to a sandy white beach. "Season in the Sun" is somewhat choppy as a dramatic structure, but it carries a captivating freight of high humor.

DAILY NEWS
September 29, 1950

'Season in the Sun' Is Humor at Its Best, and Beautifully Acted

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The next time some critic-baiter pokes me and says, "What right have you got to criticize plays? You never wrote one." I'm going to spit in his eye. And then I'll say, "Maybe I didn't—but one of our boys made it. Fellow named Wolcott Gibbs, who hates plays for The New Yorker. He wrote 'Season in the Sun.' Funniest play since 'Born Yesterday.' I nearly busted myself trying to keep from laughing the opening night."

The opening was last evening at the Cort Theatre, and "Season in the Sun" should be the first solid hit of the theatrical year. Mr. Gibbs, drawing upon his years of summering at Fire Island and upon the stories he has written about the resort and its people, has fashioned a hilarious comedy which also is literate and seasoned with a wonderful, wry wit.

His story concerns a writer, named George Crane in the play, who gets away from it all by taking wife and small son and daughter to a Fire Island cottage. He is a reformed writer, having recently recovered from a motor accident. For the first time he is taking life seriously. He is on the wagon, is ashamed of his former raffish associations, becomes chummy with an extraordinarily stuffy couple.

Fascinating Characters.

He quits his job writing humorous paragraphs for a magazine which is not named, but which is The New Yorker, begins writing a serious and stuffy novel, and becomes involved with a predatory blonde—or albino, as his disdainful wife calls the wench.

There is just enough of this story to bind together, very neatly, a fascinating collection of characters. These include a doughty old Fire Island landlady, a reporter out of the raffish past, two very amusing effeminates, the most successful madam in New York, the unhandiest handyman alive and the screwiest editor in New York. This editor is named Arthur Dodd in the play, but he is really Harold Ross, down to the last expletive and mannerism.

This seaside frolic has been beautifully staged by Burgess Meredith, and producer Courtney Burr has given Mr. Meredith some fine comedians to work with. Richard Whorf is giving the best performance of his career as the writer, and as his wife there is the attractive and intelligent Nancy Kelly. Eddie Mayehoff turns in a portrait of a stuffed shirt which is a gem—a fine example of how good acting can improve good writing.

Many Good Sketches.

Grace Valentine is a splendid old bag as the Fire Island landlady, and the scene in which she drives off the two girlish boys (excellently and tastefully played by George Ives and Jack Weston) is one of the most amusing of all the comedy vignettes. Paula Laurence adds her own humor to the role of the madam, and Charles Thompson arouses guffaws with his playing of the handyman. King Calder makes a recognizable journalist, and he and Mr. Whorf have a drunk scene which I will match against Dame Edith Evans' binge in "Daphne Laureola." And Anthony Ross is no less than perfect as the magazine editor. Add Joan Diener as the blonde and you've got — with the help of Eugene Steiner and Kathy Chapman—as good a company as even a critic like Gibbs could want.

There was much festivity at the Cort last evening, for so many of us were fond of Mr. Gibbs and Mr. Burr and were hoping all would go well for them. But my enthusiasm for the comedy is not an expression of friendship for the author and the producer. I think that people who never heard of Gibbs and Burr and who wouldn't care if they had heard will have a grand evening of laughter at "Season in the Sun." And they will admire Boris Aronson's perfect setting.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
September 29, 1950

Joys and Sorrows of Fire Island

By Richard Watts Jr.

The theory that a tough drama critic loses friends was pretty effectually dissipated at the Cort Theatre last night. There an enthusiastic audience of ardent well-wishers greeted "Season in the Sun," the first play by Wolcott Gibbs, the acid reviewer of the New Yorker, with heartiness and devotion. It is clear that they were fervently on the side of this new comedy about the flora and fauna of celebrated Fire Island, and that their friendliness was not of the purely formal kind often to be encountered among the first-nighters. In part, I think they were right.

Since he is a brilliant and witty author, incapable of setting down a bad or careless line, Mr. Gibbs has written his comedy with grace, humor and satirical insight. Many of his scenes are tremendously funny, several of his characters are drawn with an admirably malicious skill, and the author's gift for scornful but accurate observation is often in pleasant evidence. A lot of "Season in the Sun" is the kind of intelligent fun to have been expected of Wolcott Gibbs. But when he grows serious, he writes the sort of play that the drama critic of the New Yorker would look upon with devastating scorn.

Vaudeville Acts

It is, I hope, not being too technical to say that what he has given us is a series of vaudeville acts, some very good and some a little trying, in which the actors come on singly or in pairs, do their turns, and then retire to the wings. A dramatic vaudeville can be delightful, as Mr. Saroyan has proved upon occasion, but, for this to be entirely true, the serious sections of the play must be effective. And when Mr. Gibbs is telling of the soul struggle of a brilliant magazine writer, who suspects that he should give it all up and go in for more lofty creation, he is far from expert.

There are occasions, too, when "Season in the Sun" takes on some of the qualities of a private joke which can't quite be shared by outsiders. That Fire Island is a picturesque place, inhabited by curious characters, and that the famous editor of the New Yorker is a man of remarkable zest and originality, I wouldn't think of doubting. But to celebrate them in terms of the theatre demands a little less taking on faith and more in the way of evidence than Mr. Gibbs herein supposes. As a final quibble, a third act is a good thing in a three-act play, and "Season in the Sun" hardly finishes strongly.

Eddie Mayehoff

Where the new play is at its best is in such matters as the delightfully savage cartoon of a pompously respectable bore, brilliantly characterized by a comedian named Eddie Mayehoff, or the believable talk of a couple of children, who, happily, are not set down in whimsy. The little boy and girl are quietly monstrous in most convincing fashion. Also, after the psychopathic drunks of recent plays, it is curiously pleasant to see a drunk scene that is played for fun. On the other hand, in the interest of realism, two of the play's alcoholics, a reporter and a local handy man, are vast bores.

I thought the aforementioned Mr. Mayehoff quite steals the show with his devastating caricature. Richard Whorf seems just right as the writer hero, and Anthony Ross manages well as the presumably fascinating editor. Joan Diener is credible in an odd fashion as the hero's rather foolish temptress, but Nancy Kelly has certain difficulties with the slightly uninteresting role of the hero's wife. Burgess Meredith has staged things competently and Boris Aronson provides another of his fine sets. Now that Mr. Gibbs has shown that he can write some amusing vaudeville acts, I wish he would give us a play.

Journal American
September 29, 1950

Full of Wonderful And Painful Laughs

By JOHN McCLAIN

(Pinch-hitting for Robert Garland)

By any long-haired standards "Season in the Sun," which opened at the Cort Theatre last night, would sustain serious critical contusions and abrasions.

It could be said that it sags in the middle, that the plot lacks suspense or import and that it is nothing really but a series of cleverly conceived vignettes, pasted together like "short-snorter" bills, and with no more conclusive ending.

But the fact remains that with all these ponderous objections it still contains as many painful and wonderful laughs as anything I've seen for many seasons. And for such I recommend it highly.

In lieu of Scotch tape Wolcott Gibbs, the author, has chosen a beach house on Fire Island as a medium of bringing together the various characters and situations which comprise his clambake.

George Crane, successful paragrapher for a sophisticated New York magazine, has been ill and has hence been put on the wagon. He takes his wife and two small children and rents a Summer cottage on Fire Island with the prospect of renouncing his job and his dissolute friends and devoting himself to writing a serious novel based on his own reformed-drunk thesis that New York is a monster which destroys nice creative people who were born elsewhere.

Bores in the Stew

What he gets instead of his dissolute companions are a couple named Anderson, polite and frightful bores who are slumming on the island because of her asthma, a slovenly landlady who wears a sailor cap, her drunken male companion, an old chum from his former newspaper days in Paris, a successful proprietress of a house of ill repute, two men who should be women, a blonde young lady who wishes at once to put her obvious charms at his disposal, and the editor of the magazine who wants him back.

Having fought meaninglessly with his wife because of the blonde, he does, of course, get drunk. This restores his proper sense of proportion and, at the urging of his editor, he tears up his manuscript, brushes off the blonde beetle and leaves the island just ahead of a hurricane.

Some of the hilarity last night, which was considerable, may have been of the wise guy variety. Many of the characters in the comedy were not even thinly disguised portraits of persons known to the hep and enthusiastic audience, and this gave lines added zest.

Even so, there is no gainsaying the always bright and authoritative performance of Richard Whorf as the beleaguered author, or the competence of Nancy Kelly, who played his wife.

Well-Known Editor

Eddie Mayehoff, who was Anderson (Princeton '31) developed his part to such a point that in the last stanzas he had merely to lift an eyebrow to make the house come apart at the seams.

There seemed to be no doubt in anyone's mind about who Anthony Ross, the editor, was supposed to be and he may have thus collected a few undeserved yaks.

Joan Diener, the blonde bombshell, was so obviously built for her part that it didn't matter much if at times she was left standing or lying alone for protracted periods.

The direction by Burgess Meredith expressed a deep sympathy and understanding of the characters involved and the set by Boris Aronson lacked nothing but salt spray.

In all I think Courtney Burr and Malcolm Pearson, the producers, gave the backers a fine shake for their shillings.

Wolcott Gibbs, the author, deserves a special small red badge of courage. Himself a critic, and not notably gentle, he had the temerity to expose himself to the obvious challenge of, "Y-a-a, you think you know it all—why don't you write one yourself?"

For my money he got away with it.

Daily Mirror
September 29, 1950

Gibbs' 'Season in Sun' Packed with Fun

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"Season in the Sun" is a riotously funny comedy by Wolcott Gibbs. Its story line is on the thin side, but it is packed with amusing characters and hilarious dialogue. We think the new arrival at the Cort Theatre offers a most enjoyable evening, if you take it on its own terms.

The locale is what will henceforth probably be known as fabulous Fire Island. The leading characters are the jaded paragrapher for a sophisticated magazine and his practical wife. He wants to quit his job to write a serious book, but she knows that's not for him.

To their unpretentious Summer cottage come a couple of stuffy friends, an eccentric landlady, a bibulous foreign correspondent, a designing blonde, a notorious woman about town and finally a cynical editor. This wacky group doesn't solve any problems of importance, but prove delightful companions for two and a half hours.

Richard Whorf and Nancy Kelly are superb as the disillusioned humorist and his more sensible spouse. Eddie Mayehoff is quite wonderful as a pompous Princetonian with feet of clay. Anthony Ross portrays the harassed editor with effective drive and bite. Paula Lawrence and King Calder contribute interesting impersonations of people who might be recognizable to you.

Salutes also are due Grace Valentine, Jack Weston, George Ives, Doreen Lang, Joan Diener, Charles Thompson, Eugene Steiner and Kathy Chapman.

Boris Aronson has designed a set so atmospheric that you can smell salt in the air and feel the sting of sandflies and mosquitos.

Burgess Meredith, temporarily forsaking the role of actor for that of director, has staged the comedy admirably. Under his megaphoning, the performances and timing are perfect.

Producers Courtney Burr, who was responsible for "Sailor, Beware," and Malcolm Pearson have given the Gibbs script the best of everything. The result is an uproarius romp, a sure-fire antidote for gloom.

The first-nighters knocked themselves out laughing. We haven't heard such yaks and yowls in a playhouse in several semesters. Don't expect "Hamlet" or "The Cherry Orchard," and we think you will have a swell time, too.

"Black Chiffon"

New York Post
HOME NEWS
September 28, 1950

The Season Begins to Pick Up

By Richard Watts Jr.

This is at least going to be a drama season notable for the work of distinguished English actresses. A week ago Edith Evans gave impressiveness to an otherwise bald and unadorned comedy known as "Daphne Laureola," and last night, at the 48th Street Theatre, Flora Robson offered a glowing performance in a considerably more satisfactory British play called "Black Chiffon." With a fine London cast giving her perfect support, Miss Robson makes an interesting theatrical evening of Lesley Storm's unusual amalgamation of psychiatry and the Anglo-Saxon drama of the stiff upper lip.

In "Black Chiffon," Miss Storm is writing the story of a worthy and respectable matron of blameless life who, a few days before her son's wedding to a nice young girl, unaccountably steals a nightdress from a department store. A doctor is called in to find out just what caused her to do such a thing, and, although the scene between the two of them is taut and skillful, it is not long before all the amateur psychiatrists in the audience know as well as he does the mingled motives of love and jealousy that drove the lady to her act. That, however, is not the point of the play.

Psychiatry and Drama

Psychiatry, I suspect, can be as harmful to the drama as it can be helpful in life, because, once a stage character is reduced to a case history, theatrical effectiveness tends to disappear from it. That is where the author of "Black Chiffon" is wise. She is not primarily interested in the probing of her heroine's motives. A dramatic, rather than a scientific, point is her chief concern. How is the unfortunate lady going to behave after the doctor has told her what is wrong with her? That is the basic question of her play, and it makes the work something more than dramatized psychiatry.

Although "Black Chiffon" is the first steadily interesting play of the new season, it rarely, I think, quite lives up to the promise of its first act. The beginning of Miss Storm's narrative is slow and casual, in a characteristic fashion of the English theatre, but it does build up an atmosphere of ominous foreboding in a seemingly placid and happy family group that hints of dramatic things to come. The dramatic things arrive, too, but, to me, they never entirely equal the potentialities of that first-act suspense.

Flora Robson

Yet, if "Black Chiffon" is not a completely satisfying drama, or one of a high order or distinction, it nevertheless provides an evening of almost continous theatrical effectiveness. In considerable part, that is due to the excellence of Miss Robson's performance. Always an actress of unusual ability and intelligence, she plays the unhappy lady, torn by her husband's neurotic jealousy of her son, with such honesty, directness and emotional power that it might well give impressiveness to a less competent drama than Miss Storm has devised.

The other performances are, in their several ways, almost equally helpful. There is not a weak spot in the cast. Patricia Marmont seemed to me particularly good in the unspectacular part of the matron's sensible, intelligent and charming daughter. Anthony Ireland is splendid as the psychiatrist, and so is Raymond Huntley as the jealous and unpleasant husband. The same may be said for Richard Gale as the son, Patricia Hicks as the fiancee, and Janet Barrow as the family servant. Miss Hicks, by the way, has a moment at the telephone that is particularly winning. The theatre is getting interesting.

"BLACK CHIFFON"

Play by Lesley Storm; staged by Charles Hickman; setting by Larry Eggleton; presented by John Wildberg at the 48th Street Theatre, September 27, 1950. The cast:

Roy Christie.....Richard Gale
Louise.....Patricia Hicks
Thea.....Patricia Marmont
Nannie.....Janet Barrow
Alicia Christie...Flora Robson
Robert Christie.....
Raymond Huntley
Dr. Bennett Hawkins....
Anthony Ireland

Synopsis: The action takes place in the drawing room of the Christies' house on Chelsea Embankment, London. Time: The present, November. Act I. Scene 1. Afternoon. Scene 2. Three hours later. Act II. Scene 1. The following afternoon. Scene 2. Five minutes later. Act III. Scene 1. Next morning. Scene 2. A few hours later.

"Black Chiffon"—*continued*

New York Herald Tribune
September 28, 1950

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Miss Robson Wears it Well

IN "BLACK CHIFFON," at the Forty-eighth Street Theater, superlative acting once more animates a straggling British importation. With rapt intensity, Flora Robson very nearly has one believing that Lesley Storm's fumbling excursion into psychiatry was worth the effort. Like Edith Evans in "Daphne Laureola," she floods several scenes with a magical authority quite lacking in the writing. On the whole, her vital and abundant performance merely calls embarrassing attention to the barren nature of the play. Even a brilliant tour-de-force needs more of a target than "Black Chiffon" affords.

* * *

The author was obviously intent on composing a somewhat terrifying psychological melodrama, but she has failed dismally to make a case history in quasi-kleptomania fascinating or urgent. The best that can be said of her work is that it is literate and gives Miss Robson a chance to demonstrate her mastery of a wide range of emotions. The star needed no such springboard, particularly when it snaps in half before the final curtain. What Miss Storm was up to in her climax is something of a mystery, but not one that enhances the suspense or entertainment of a lot of trite situations revolving in a vacuum. "Black Chiffon" is far too ungainly a drama to be saved by acting.

The title refers to the material of a nightgown which a well-to-do London matron lifts from a shop counter with the same jubilation she had just heard in a street-walker's laughter. The desperate dilemma in which she finds herself after her arrest is quite neatly probed and solved by a doctor who has no use for Freud, but the lady prefers prison to baring her heart in public. Some clew to all this mumbo-jumbo, which seems far less perilous on the stage than it must have to Miss Storm, lies in the fact that a father is jealous of his son and a mother has an uncontrollable urge to mock the former. There is also talk of a sedate mind and an eager heart which leads to singular obstinacy.

In any case Miss Robson squanders a great deal of talent on this trivia. The passage in which she gleans some notion of what prompted her criminal act from the medicine man and then is led to think she is abnormal by her sadistic husband is moderately effective and so is that in which an elderly retainer breaks down as she marches off to court. Aside from these bright moments, the star struggles in dramatic quicksand. Anthony Ireland plays the physician reticently and Raymond Huntley is a properly desiccated husband and father, while Richard Gale is good as the son. Charles Hickman's staging makes a great deal of walking around a living room to no purpose. There is little purpose and less achievement in "Black Chiffon."

The New York Times
September 28, 1950

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Although the author of "Black Chiffon" is not exactly inspired, the actors are superb. The chief one is Flora Robson, who is always welcome in this country. She is playing the part of the patient in a psychiatric melodrama that seems terribly poignant by the time she has wrung the truth out of it.

But she has come to the Forty-eighth Street Theatre from England with some admirable associates. Raymond Huntley, as the stunned husband of a lady caught in the act of shoplifting, gives a brilliant performance; and Anthony Ireland is wonderfully adroit and forebearing as the psychiatrist.

* * *

Since "Black Chiffon" has been playing in England for some time, the performance has had time to acquire a finish. But that does not wholly account for the dexterity of the group performance. For Charles Hickman has directed it with just the right instinct for mood, pace and tone. Lesley Storm's "Black Chiffon" is not an extraordinary play. But the actors and the director have given it the semblance of a truth that is always somber and occasionally very moving. Style can be an excellent substitute for genius.

This is the story of a gentle woman who unaccountably steals a black chiffon nightdress in a London department store. She does not know why she has done it. She is a woman of honor, good family and sufficient wealth. In a frantic attempt to prepare some sort of defense in court the next morning, her husband's solicitors call in a psychiatrist. Looking under the surface of polite and agreeable family life, the psychiatrist finds the motive in tensions that do not at first seem to be important.

* * *

The scientific approach to human problems is undeniably severe, and the playwriting in "Black Chiffon" is generally bare. But the central situation is one that wounds the feelings of the innocent as well as the guilty. Once the black chiffon has been stolen, you cannot shake loose from the consequences.

And if the literary workmanship is clinical and mechanical, the acting of Miss Robson redeems it. She is a very accomplished player. But she is also kind and honest, which are virtues that are very moving in the theatre. The inadvertent thief she is playing is hardly more than a case-history in the play. But the character gives an illusion of having qualities of nobility in Miss Robson's direct, sincere and quiet acting.

* * *

Mr. Huntley and Mr. Ireland are the perfect counterparts. Mr. Huntley's gnarled and sharp-tongued husband seems to conceal a lot of private suffering; and Mr. Ireland's psychiatrist is deferential without being patronizing or pompous. Patricia Marmont is not only beautiful but sensitively alert as the terrified daughter, and Richard Gale is straightforward and aware as the son. As the family servant, Janet Barrow gives a finer performance than the part requires

* * *

All the action takes place inside an uncommonly original and attractive living room designed by Larry Eggleton. Everything about "Black Chiffon" is believable because the actors are so skillful and play with so much personal integrity. No doubt Miss Robson can take most of the credit for that. No one would dare make a false move in her presence.

Daily Mirror
September 28, 1950

'Black Chiffon' Honest Drama of Suspense

By ROBERT COLEMAN

After a run of nearly a year in London, "Black Chiffon" arrived at the 48th Street Theatre last evening under the banner of John Wildberg. Flora Robson, who has been called "mistress of emotion," is starred. Also in the cast are two English actors of distinction, Anthony Ireland and Raymond Huntley.

Miss Robson is probably best known here for her wonderful performance in "Ladies in Retirement." That was a suspense play. Her newest vehicle is also a suspense play, a study in family relationships and what might be termed normal abnormal psychology.

"Black Chiffon" has to do with the tragedy that came to a middle-class British family on the eve of a wedding. For what appeared to be no good reason, a wife and mother stole a black chiffon night-dress from a store. She had a generous allowance, and her home life seemed to be happy. Came the question: Why did she commit the theft?

The remainder of the drama revealed why, and what she, against the wishes of her psychiatrist and counsel, did about it. It is an unwritten rule not to disclose the resolution of a suspense play, so we shan't. But if you'll recall your "Oedipus Rex," a suspicion of what happened may flash across your mind.

"Black Chiffon" was penned by a gifted young Scottish newspaper woman, Lesley Storm. She has the ability to reveal human emotions with keen insight and compassion. She can turn a trenchant or an evocative phrase where it is called for. "Black Chiffon," we suspect is an even better play than we saw last night.

Charles Hickman, one of England's most promising young directors, has not quite gotten all of the script and the excellent cast that he might have. His staging was a little stilted at times. It failed to give Miss Robson, Ireland and Huntley the scope they really required.

Hickman probably directed the play with a respect for British restraint. Personally, we think it would have been more effective had the movements and the speeches of the principals been a bit more informal and keyed higher. But this is a minor reservation.

In the supporting cast, we liked Patricia Hicks, Patricia Marmont and Richard Gale. Miss Marmont, incidentally, is the daughter of the famous silent film star, Percy Marmont.

We think "Black Chiffon" is going to be a more rewarding play after it has become acclimated to America. But, as it stands, it is the best drama of the new season, and well worth seeing.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

September 28, 1950

'Chiffon' Is Drama Of Kleptomania

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Psychopathic drama.
Topic—Sudden kleptomania.
Star—Splendid.
Mood—Taut, harassed.
Credit—Authenticity.
Debit—Deliberate pace.
I find it—Engrossing.

"Black Chiffon" falls into the now familiar category of dramas whose motives are deeply mental. The fascination of this one lies in its rational honesty.

Shortly after the play opens, a perfectly respectable woman steals a black chiffon nightgown from a shop, is caught and must stand trial. Her daughter is pregnant and her son is about to be married. So the pressure of her predicament is heightened by its inevitable effect on her family, should she be sentenced to prison.

Naturally, the play is concerned with the probing for her motive, which she insists does not exist. In general, her lapse has to do with the end of responsibilities to her children. In particular it is unfair to go into too much detail.

Jealous Husband.

It is enough to state that her husband has always been jealous of her love for their son, and that she has endeavored therefore to double her own concern for the boy.

Actually the husband is the most influential element in the play, and it is unfortunate that he is directed and played without a shred of attraction. Despite her avowals, it is difficult to believe that this woman could love him.

The play's emphasis is always on the wife and her aberration. The husband is treated as a cool character, justly nursing an injury. Actually his behavior is abominable. It is his atrocious interpretation of his wife's mental attitude that is alone responsible for her ultimate decision.

The situation that is finally revealed is neat and logical. The method of arriving at it is intelligent, painstaking and authoritative.

I, for one, could do with less teddibly British gallantry, and quite a lot of stepping up the tempo. It is also annoying to have everyone in the cast except the star speak the last phrase of each sentence from behind tonsils, so only God and the author understand.

Flora Robson does a truly excellent job as the woman of the case. It is a role of single mood which she illuminates and varies, brightens and augments, in the subtlest natural fashion.

Contagious Moods.

For pure acting excitement, it is hard to imagine anything more moving than her description to a doctor of the emotions which led up to her shoplifting. Her gloom and elation are utterly contagious.

Anthony Ireland is immensely agreeable and quietly acute as the doctor. Raymond Huntley's interpretation of the husband is effective for its intentions but harder to judge because I happen to disagree so entirely with the conception of this character. If he must make shocking accusations at a wife he loves, he should have some sense of horror, and not shout them sadistically in her teeth.

This "Black Chiffon" can be an absorbing evening, and even more so if the company remembers that volume is relative and starts talking louder right at the start.

Journal American

September 28, 1950

A Great Show With An Exceptional Cast

By JOHN McCLAIN

Pinch-hitting for Robert Garland

While a great many citizens were gathered last night at Yankee Stadium and various homes and taverns to view a world's heavyweight championship fight, a no less privileged congregation convened at the Forty-eighth Street Theatre to witness the American premier of a wonderfully conceived and executed drama called "Black Chiffon."

A fella hates to miss a fight but emerging from the playhouse I didn't feel I'd been cheated.

This production, with almost the identical cast, ran two years in London and I see no reason why it should not enjoy an equally happy hegira here.

Miss Flora Robson has in previous plays and pictures killed more persons than the First Marines, but here she devotes her gentler talents to an extremely abstruse role which carries the entire play.

There is no possible doubt as to her success with the assignment, but one realizes that she also owes a great debt to the brilliance of her supporting cast.

In baseball there have been a few great pitchers without a capable infield, and in this case Miss Robson has several Rizzutos going for her.

Lesley Storm, the author, lent an inestimable assist to the proceedings by supplying a powerful psychological vehicle.

The story opens quietly in the home of an average middle-class London family. There is the father, and the mother (Miss Robson), a son, a married daughter, and the son's fiancee. If there is a certain friction between the father and son, it seems hardly abnormal, and you are inclined to like these people.

Then, in slow strides, the plot proceeds toward its conclusion. The mother is late getting home, and when she arrives it develops that she has committed an apparently meaningless crime. She has stolen a nightgown from a store and must face trial.

A psychiatrist is called in and through sympathetic questioning of both parents it is brought out that her act was caused by an unconscious desire to thwart her son's impending marriage.

In an entirely spiritual way she was more in love with the boy than with her husband and this, in turn, was responsible for the resentment of the father for the son.

On the threshold of her trial she comes to a decision which provides the climax of the play. With the remnants of her shattered life lying around her she takes the only course compatible with her sense of loyalty and decency.

No, it's not as easy as suicide.

The two foremost members of Miss Robson's infield are Raymond Huntley, as the father, and Anthony Ireland, as the psychoanalyst.

Pop is by no means a sympathetic character but Huntley plays him with such obvious frustration and introversion that you finally understand and like him.

I can only say of Ireland that he convinced me of the fact that five minutes after he had met the mother he knew more about her than she did.

The rest of the cast is equally competent, as English casts have a way of being.

Richard Gale, the son, is new and bright and handsome and quite able to hold his own in the impressive surroundings. Patricia Marmont, the daughter, was attractive and capable throughout a difficult part, and Janet Barrow, as Nannie, and Patricia Hicks, as the fiancee, seemed ideally situated.

The direction by Charles Hickman impressed me as exceptional. Miss Storm's dialogue is compelling when, it needs to be and she exhibited a fine restraint in not having people moving around the stage doing meaningless things when they didn't have to.

Larry Eggleton's set seemed entirely authentic, especially when it was lit for late London afternoon—that strange dusk that is unknown elsewhere.

If there is any cause to carp it is in the main story line—the plot point wherein a woman of certain wealth and obvious taste and refinement and no previous convictions is faced by a horrible dilemma for having inadvertently snatched a nightgown.

But don't get me wrong. This is a great show.

DAILY NEWS
September 28, 1950

Flora Robson's 'Black Chiffon' Is A Longish Drama About a Nightie

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In "Black Chiffon," which was presented at the 48th St. Theatre last evening, Flora Robson snitches a nightie out of a London department store and goes to jail for it. Between the snitching and the jailing there is a great deal of psychiatric talk written by Miss Lesley Storm which affords Miss Robson, a highly respected actress, several long and well played moments of emotional stress. It also afforded me several long moments of nothing to do but just sit there and think that my cousins, the British, are a wonderfully patient people to have made this play such a hit in London.

Miss Robson is the mother of a son and a daughter. She has a husband who looks like Calvin Coolidge—but a talking Coolidge. Her daughter is married and is expecting a baby, and to prove it the pretty actress who plays the role, Patricia Marmont, has padded herself with enough kapok to outfit Sir Ralph Richardson as Falstaff.

Miss Robson's son, wavy-haired Richard Gale, is about to be married—which is why Miss Robson grabs the nightie.

When a store detective nails Miss Robson and charges her with theft, her husband, Raymond Huntley—the one who looks like Coolidge—summons all possible aid in defense. The aid includes a psychiatric practitioner, Anthony Ireland, who looks like Irving Berlin. In the course of an act or so Mr. Ireland discovers that Miss Robson has a psychopathic love for her son.

Takes Secret to Jail.

Mr. Ireland is confident that a proper analysis of this motive for shoplifting will get Miss Robson off with a reprimand. But, rather than have her heart thus bared, she chooses to plead guilty and get three months in prison—for in severely rationed England the pilfering of luxury items like black chiffon bedwear is a most serious offense, even for a woman who never did anything wrong in her life before.

I should be, and am, completely respectful toward Miss Robson as an actress, but I prefer to remember her as she was in her previous appearance here—as a fine Lady Macbeth. I cannot be as respectful toward Lesley Storm's play, for it strikes me as being extraordinarily inactive.

Mr. Ireland is ingratiating as the doctor and Mr. Huntley is forbidding as the husband. And Mr. Chapman has practically nothing else to say, except to apologize to everybody.

"Southern Exposure"

New York World-Telegram
and
The ~~Herald~~ Sun
September 27, 1950

'Southern Exposure' Smells Of Cotton and Magnolias

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Fussy farce.
Topic—Wilting aristocracy.
Nature—Grimly southern.
Concerns—Old belles and diaries.
I find it—Right trying.

Everybody in the Biltmore Theater last night tried and failed to go along with "Southern Exposure." This is Miss Margo Jones' newest entry in the Broadway race from her highly successful theater in Dallas.

Speaking of Texas, most of the premiere house was filled with Lone Star voters, but even out of loyalty they couldn't laugh very much.

Everything about the play was mildly agreeable. It simply lacked substance. Despite some attractive performing, the vehicle deserves amateur actors.

It centers around Penelope Mayweather, one of those dainty, everlasting debutantes that the Southern states produce. A Natchez spinster, she occasionally lets tourists in to see her well preserved and heavily mortgaged ancestral home. Much of her time, since the Spanish American War, she has spent writing a diary.

Long on the Way.

Sift into this mix a young Yankee whose satire on racial conditions has been locally banned, and a pretty niece from next door who seems determined to "go all the way" before she gets married. The results are just as inevitable as they sound, but they are a long time arriving.

Act One of this opus might as well be scrapped. The first real laugh crops up well after the first intermission. Various plot lines appear and disappear with a frequency which suggests that the author lacks concentration.

This saga of Natchez is on record as a big, fat hit in Dallas. It is a lot farther from home on 47th St.

The principal role of Penelope is played by Betty Greene Little with much delicacy and charm. In an odd way she seems to be reporting too literally on this prototype of Li'l Missy grown up. The impersonation lacks the extensions and exaggerations that could make some kind of comment on the original.

Turned-on Charm.

Cameron Mitchell is far and away the easiest and most professional member of the cast, as the young author. He just turns on the charm and keeps it on, which suits this kind of play.

Pat Crowley is pretty and promising, as the adventurous niece, Evelyn Davis gets all the laughs there are out of a maid of all work, Mary Finney brings to life a Mary Petty cartoon of Eleanor Roosevelt as a tourist guide; and Victor Sutherland is reassuringly in touch with horse sense as a banker.

"SOUTHERN EXPOSURE"

Comedy by Owen Crump; staged by Margo Jones; costumes by Kenn Barr; setting by Frederick Fox; presented by Miss Jones, Tad Adoue and Manning Gurian at the Biltmore Theatre, September 26, 1950. The cast:

Miss Penelope Mayweather.. Betty Greene Little
Australia..... Evelyn Davis
Mary Belle Tucker..... Mary Finney
Avery Randall..... Victor Sutherland
John Salguod.. Cameron Mitchell
Carol Randall..... Pat Crowley
Emmeline Randall..... Dorothy Elder
Benjamin Carter.. Alan Manson

Synopsis: Scene—The upstairs sitting-room of Mayweather Hall, Natchez, Miss. Act I. Scene 1. The present. Noon of an early spring day. Scene 2. Nine o'clock the same evening. Act II. Scene 1. The next morning. Scene 2. Nine o'clock the same evening. Act III. Eight o'clock the next morning.

The New York Times

September 27, 1950

'Southern Exposure,' a Comedy by Owen Crump, Arrives on Broadway From Dallas

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Little puffs of excitement were coming out of Dallas last season whenever Owen Crump's "Southern Exposure" was performed at Theatre '50 across the international border that divides Texas from the United States. The puffs are not likely to be caused by excitement here. At the Biltmore Theatre, where Margo Jones installed Mr. Crump's comedy last evening, "Southern Exposure" looks like a stock job none too skillfully written and none too expertly put on the stage. Dallas saw something in it that escapes the damyankees here.

This is likely to be inhospitable news to the solid phalanx of Dallas people who attended the opening last night and rooted for their team. But they were the people who enjoyed Mr. Crump's lampoon of Natchez most thoroughly. Although they perform their daily wonders at home a good many miles west of Natchez, they know the Natchez private jokes more intimately than we do away off in little old up here.

* * *

Mr. Crump starts off by showing us a venerable Natchez mansion that is presided over by a genteel Southern lady; it is mortgaged up to the hilt and invaded periodically by Northern tourists for a fee. He concludes by marrying a Northern writer of Southern scandal to a very pretty Natchez maiden and persuading a rude New York publisher to pay a large advance on the memoirs of the genteel Southern lady.

What happens in between is less certain. For Mr. Crump is a pretty easy-going writer who grabs anything in sight for a laugh and dotes on minor distractions. In her stage direction, the cyclonic Margo has conspired with him to make "Southern Exposure" look like stock company work. The performance is frantically humorous in all styles, from the plaintive coyness of Betty Greene Little as the Southern lady to the gawky caricature of Mary Finney as the leader of conducted tours to the old Natchez homes. Nearly everyone in the cast, except Pat Crowley, is constantly breathless from either excitement or confusion, and this includes Cameron Mitchell, who was consistently under control in "Death of a Salesman" until he left home in the spring.

* * *

Miss Crowley should be carefully studied by managers and directors in need of a young actress with a trim style and the ability to act without drenching the stage in perspiration. She plays the part of an independent-minded girl whose mind is as clear as a bell, and she makes her points with decision and ease. She seemed like practically the only professional thing on the stage last evening. For "Southern Exposure" is a regional joke that loses savor the further it travels from home.

New York Herald Tribune

September 27, 1950

By HOWARD BARNES

Poorly Exposed

THE new comedy at the Biltmore, "Southern Exposure," takes one on a dreary pilgrimage to Natchez, Miss. If the town is anything like what Owen Crump pictures in a first play, it is a moujik trap to be avoided. Descendants of ante-bellum families scamper around ante-bellum mansions, cutting capers verging on the ridiculous and the tasteless. Yankee sightseers do not enliven the quaint buffoonery, nor do a couple of literary prowlers in search of titillating memoirs. They are all dull people in a sorry charade, which does not even have good acting to its credit.

* * *

The author, who studied his trade in Hollywood, has had the cute notion of having a Vermont novelist with his name spelled backwards invade the spinsterly precincts of Mayweather Hall. He flatters and flusters Miss Penelope, who turns out to be quite a siren in old maid's clothes, takes a brash young cousin away from her fiancee, with whom she was about to celebrate a "pact" in his bachelor's quarters, and gets his hands on his hostess's red hot diary. Even as arrant farce, it is tedious contriving, while the high point of the dialogue has a frowzy resident punning ponderously with "natch" and Natchez.

Margo Jones, the high priestess of Thespis in Dallas, has brought the play from her arena theater there and has staged it after a fashion. She has postured the gay old Mississippi doll, who has a weakness for port, against a pretty enough setting by Frederick Fox. She has had the Northern hero crawl frantically out of view of tourists, the heroine paint her toenails and the Negro serving girl burst into a "hallelujah" or two. The action approximates pandemonium in the climax, but it makes for very little entertainment. Direction and acting have a way of emphasizing the lack of laughter in "Southern Exposure."

* * *

In the part of Miss Penelope, Betty Greene Little flutters and swoons with stock Southern gestures until she becomes defiantly proud of her secret escapades. Unfortunately, her performance has neither conviction nor the sharply defined dimensions of caricature. Cameron Mitchell struggles with the character of the Yankee intruder, banging a typewriter when the comedy's structure is about to crumple about him, and Pat Crowley tries with vast lack of success to be an importunate Southern belle, who keeps shifting her overnight bag from one spot to another. Mary Finney is of more help as the guide of pilgrimages and Dorothy Elder has a somewhat venomous bit as an avaricious matron. Natchez deserves a gayer dramatic celebration.

Daily Mirror

September 27, 1950

'Southern Exposure' Just Isn't Airy Enough

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Owen Crump's comedy, "Southern Exposure," established a four-year box-office record when presented last season at Margo Jones' Dallas (Tex.) Theatre. Encouraged by this success, Miss Jones teamed with Tad Adoue and Manning Gurian to bring it to Broadway. It opened here last evening at the Biltmore Theatre, and we suspect it shoulda stood in Texas.

"Southern Exposure" was evidently intended to be a satire on the annual pilgrimages to the beautiful ante-bellum mansions in Natchez, Miss., but somewhere in the writing Arthur Crum ended up with a broad burlesque. He started with a promising idea, but it got lost in too pat construction and none too subtle penmanship.

The comedy has to do with an impoverished aristocrat, owner of the handsomest old house in town, mortgaged to the hilt. To help stave of disaster, she rents a room to a pleasant and persuasive young pilgrim, who is eventually discovered to be a literary viper who had whacked the daylights out of Southern tradition via a best-seller.

The interloper eventually talks the aging belle into selling her sensational memoirs for publication, and marries the attractive daughter of her stodgy relatives. Somehow, we anticipated these events all along. The surprises were about as cleverly concealed as the signals of a raw baseball catcher.

The hit of the evening for many of us first-nighters was the charming setting by Frederick Fox, a temporary refugee from television. Kenn Barr's costumes also were helpful. Miss Jones' direction emphasized the play's rather obvious humor.

Cameron Mitchell, whom you may remember as Willy Loman's younger son in "Death of a Salesman," is the amiably brash debunker; Betty Greene Little, his tippling landlady, and Pat Crowley her pretty young relative. Their performances are good, within the scope of the Jones staging.

Others who labor valiantly, if not always successfully, on behalf of "Southern Exposure" are Evelyn Davis, Mary Finney, Victor Sutherland, Dorothy Elder and Alan Manson.

Miss Crowley is a delighful ingenue, and we should like to see her again in a better part.

Though we don't think Southern Exposure" will find the Broadway climate to its liking, it could prove a stock goldmine.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
September 27, 1950

A Quiet Journey to Old Natchez
By Richard Watts Jr.

It may sound patronizing for me to say so, but I suspect that Owen Crump's "Southern Exposure" would have been better off if it had stayed in Dallas, where Margo Jones first presented it, instead of traipsing off to New York. There it no doubt seemed a nice Dixie lark, bright, bantering and unpretentious. Here, at the Biltmore Theatre last night, where it had its first local performance, it looked a bit lost in its metropolitan surroundings, and its moments of satisfactory gayety appeared few and far between.

At first, I had certain hopes for it. Mr. Crump has written a comedy about an old Southern mansion in Natchez, presided over by a gentle but spirited little ex-belle, who tries to make a genteel living by turning her home into a kind of museum for loud and vulgar Yankee tourists. For a time, the contrast between the aging romantic lady and the upstart visitors makes for an Americanized Chekhovian narrative that seems on the verge of capturing, in more farcical terms, the spirit Joshua Logan sought for in "The Wisteria Trees."

Yankee Author

But the author was after a different, and considerably less ambitious, aim. He introduces a young Northern author, who had written a book about the South that had been banned in Natchez, and is, for that rather insufficient reason, bent on wreaking vengeance on the late Confederacy. He is, it seems, going to expose the State of Mississippi. But he is captivated by the little old lady, falls in love with a Southern ingenue who is about to experiment in sex with an unworthy neighbor, and you can imagine what becomes of his schemes.

In short, the play drops whatever pretensions it ever had toward being a satirical study of manners and goes in for mechanical plot manipulations. And I am afraid that they aren't particularly effective mechanics. Some of them are reasonably funny, and there is a likeably modest air about almost everything which takes place, but not even the pleasant acting involved can keep "Southern Exposure" from seeming the sort of amiable amateur theatricals that shouldn't stray far from the folks at home.

On Being Disarmed

I don't see how it would be possible to have any active dislike for Mr. Crump's comedy. It is too friendly and good-natured for that, and there is a modest charm in the production that is entirely disarming. I was pleased that everything turned out well for the sweet little lady, the nice ingenue, and the young Yankee author. Unfortunately, you have to go through a lot of long, dull spaces before happiness descends upon them, and the ex-belle turns out to have been the greatest diarist since Samuel Pepys.

Some agreeable performances are involved in the proceedings. Betty Greene Little, of the original Dallas cast, is both charming and skillful as the aging lady. Cameron Mitchell, who was so fine as the younger son in "Death of a Salesman," proves again that he is one of the best young actors in America as the Northerner, and Pat Crowley is freshly attractive as the ingenue. There is an effective set by Frederick Fox. But "Southern Exposure" turns out in the end to be a rather negative little antic.

DAILY NEWS
September 27, 1950

Two New Comediennes Help Make 'Southern Exposure' Happy Play
By JOHN CHAPMAN

From her theatre in Dallas Margo Jones has brought a happy comedy, "Southern Exposure," to the Biltmore Theatre. Along with the comedy she has brought a fetching actress, Betty Greene Little, to play the role of a poor but genteel Southerner, and another actress, Mary Finney, who is the funniest character woman I have seen since May Vokes was in "The Bat."

The author of "Southern Exposure" is Alan Crump, a Hollywood screenwriter. Mr. Crump has looked wtih good-humored affection on the city of Natchez and its annual Pilgrimage, during which flocks of tourists are permitted to traispe through the fine antebellum mansions and be greeted by a citizenry which has dolled itself up the way people dressed before the War Between the States.

Mr. Crump's story is of a middle-aged maiden lady who has the most beautiful—and most mortgaged—house in Natchez. She is primly polite to but secretly horrified by the tourists who are herded through her home by an energetic female tourist-herder. She is primly grateful for the 25 cents a head she gets from the sightseers' fees—but even with this income, which in season might amount to $3.50 a day, she cannot stave off the damyankee bank much longer.

Enter a Writer.

In fact, this lady has no more chance of keeping her home than Helen Hayes had of keeping Wisteria Plantation. But an ingratiating young writer talks her into letting him rent a room—her husband's room, the Senator's bedroom—and this helps some. It appears that Natchez is interesting to a writing man, not as a place of fine homes but as a curio, because it is the only town in the country which has banned a book which is a best seller everywhere else. The affable young writer has to turn on all his charm—which is considerable, for Cameron Mitchell is playing him—to get the lady tc take a roomer. She screams and grows faint when she hears he is from Vermont, and adjures him tc stay hidden when anybody else is in the house.

The events which occur in Mayweather Hall are either pleasant, funny or hilarious. Obviously, Miss Betty Greene Little gets to keep her place and has quite a personal and social triumph at the end. Naturally, Mr. Mitchell runs across a cute little Southern belle of the liberated kind and has a happy romance. And it goes without saying that various busybodies get their due.

Very Good Company.

Miss Little's performance has great appeal. She looks a little like Lillian Gish and acts a little like Dorothy Gish, and she is an able comedienne. Miss Finney, as the tourist-herder, must be seen. It is an adventure to watch her walk down a few stairs and another adventure to see her separate herself from a sofa.

Mr. Mitchell's performance is admirable, and for the role of the Southern belle there is a pert and pretty little dish named Pat Crowley. Victor Sutherland and Dorothy Elder are nice help as a pair of busybodies, and Evelyn Davis has some fat lines and business as a Negro maid. There is a lovely setting by Frederick Fox and Kenn Barr has provided some beautiful costumes. Margo Jones has directed the comedy expertly and with gaiety constantly in mind.

Journal American

September 27, 1950

Answer Is 'Nope' To Improbable Play

By JOHN McCLAIN

Pinch-hitting for Robert Garland

Margo Jones is a Texas lady of conclusive theatrical talent and inventiveness. She directed the "Theatre '50" in Dallas with distinction and is credited with having pioneered the outdoor arena-type theatre which has caught on largely throughout the sticks.

Last night (in company with Tad Adoue and Manning Gurian) she brought to the Biltmore Theatre a new comedy by Owen Crump called "Southern Exposure" which she tried out in Dallas last Spring and considered meritorious enough to bring to Broadway. In my opinion she made a mistake.

The proceedings go something like this:

A young Damyankee author has written a first novel which, although a best seller everywhere else, is so offensive to the people of Natchez, Mississippi, that its sale in that town is prohibited.

This circumstance (representing a loss of royalties to the novelist of probably twelve dollars) infuriates him to the point of going South and entering this citadel of pre-war culture to determine personally why he has been so singularly discriminated against.

Improbable Story

Once there he invades the ancestral home of Miss Penelope Mayweather, last of her illustrious line, who stands off the sheriff by permitting tourists to view the premises at a price. Under a pseudonym, he manages to ingratiate himself to her and to ease her failing finances by renting a room.

This puts him in position to become involved with the affianced daughter of one of the landlady's rich relatives. I hardly need tell you that there is a mortgage about to be foreclosed, that he busts up the engagement of the young doll, and that Miss Penelope sells her memoirs for $5,000 in the last act.

The entire demonstration struck me as highly improbable almost from the kick-off. The best comedy, I believe, derives from creating real and understandable people, projecting them into ridiculous though possible situations and then letting them take it from there.

Perhaps through some unhappy deficiency in my geographical background, I failed to believe either the characters or their problems.

Some Laughs

Despite all this there were several solid laughs, many of them contributed by Miss Mary Finney in the role of the organized tour conductor. Miss Betty Greene Little, who played Miss Penelope, operated valiantly with what I thought was a monotonously familiar role — that of the poor refined Southern lady living in the gracious past.

Miss Pat Crowley, who was cast as the tasty young doll was certainly all of that and should do well next time out, as we say in the Racing Form, and Cameron Mitchell, performing as the author, was suitably masculine and appealing, as you may recall if you saw him recently in "Death of a Salesman."

The set by Frederick Fox was convincing and it seemed to me the direction by Miss Jones brought as much reality to the effort as the lines would allow.

By and large, however, and in words of one syllable, I feel forced to say—Nope.

"Affairs of State"

DAILY NEWS

September 26, 1950

'Affairs of State' Frankly Slight, But Holm and Owen Make it Fun

By JOHN CHAPMAN

A week ago the Broadway season resumed with an English play, "Daphne Laureola," and last evening it continued with a French sex comedy, "Affairs of State," being offered at the Royale. It is a French importation, even though it was hand-written in English by its author, Louis Verneuil, who has been on these shores for a decade, and even though its locale is Washington, D. C. It made a very pleasant evening for me, thanks to some pretty good jokes by Mr. Verneuil and the extremely likable playing of Reginald Owen and Celeste Holm.

A few seasons ago Russel Crouse and Howard Lindsay wrote a comedy about national politics, "State of the Union," which had a deal of good, solid matter in it. Mr. Verneuil, who once was the French Owen Davis, turning out plays for Parisians on a quick-assembly basis, has no such ambitions as had Lindsay and Crouse. He does not want to make politics funny, and his jokes in that direction are fairly obvious; all he wants to do is to make love interesting and amusing—at least to the lovers.

Could Use Some Music.

The plot is simple enough for an Offenbach operetta; indeed, it would have done no harm to let Miss Holm sing a song or two. A bachelor, an upcomer in diplomatic circles, is in love with the wife of a former Secretary of State—an old boy who is still a power in diplomacy. In furtherance of his career the bachelor is persuaded to take a wife in name only—a young woman who can play the role of hostess and devoted spouse well enough to please the voting public.

The outcome is as certain as it is familiar. Bachelor really and truly falls in love with hired wife; hired wife has been nuts about bachelor from start; the crafty ex-Secretary, who has maneuvered the affair with such deftness, gets to keep his own wife instead of losing her to bachelor.

Mr. Verneuil, who directed his own work, has made "Affairs of State" good-natured and frankly slight. Some of his remarks, though, have sharp points, as when the ex-Secretary of State announces that he is going to tour the world and visit all the countries in whose affairs he used to meddle without ever having seen them.

Funny Young Lady.

Miss Holm is an engaging comedienne as she transforms herself from a prim schoolteacher to a glittering Washington hostess. She has a way of underplaying her lines and timing them right which is intelligent acting, and she uses those great big eyes to enormous advantage.

Mr. Owen is a delight as the old ex-Secretary, being much smoother and craftier than any of the boys we have had in the job recently.

"AFFAIRS OF STATE"

Comedy by Louis Verneuil; staged by Mr. Verneuil; setting by Paul Morrison; costumes by Dorothy Jeakins; presented by Richard W. Krakeur and Fred F. Finklehoffe at the Royale Theatre, September 25, 1940. The cast:

Philip Russell...Reginald Owen
Constance Russell.....
Barbara O'Neil
George Henderson.....
Shepperd Strudwick
Lawrence.....Elmer Brown
Irene Elliott.....Celeste Holm
Byron Winkler..Harry Bannister

Synopsis: The action takes place in George Henderson's home in a suburb of Washington. Time: The present. Act I. Scene 1. Middle of July. Late afternoon. Scene 2. Ten days later. 3 p.m. Act II. Late September. 2:30 p.m. Scene 2. Early October. 6 p.m. Act III. Two days later. Afternoon.

Shepperd Strudwick is well cast as the bachelor, and so is Barbara O'Neil as the other woman. Harry Bannister appears as another diplomat. The setting by Paul Morrison of a Chevy Chase mansion is a splendid one—but I wish Dorothy Jeakins' costumes for Miss Holm were not quite so splendid.

"Affairs of State"—*continued*

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

September 26, 1950

= By HOWARD BARNES =

L'Amour, L'Amour

LOUIS VERNEUIL displays a remarkable command of American wit and idiom in "Affairs of State." Writing his first play in English, the noted French author has fashioned a sprightly topical comedy which is performed with relish at the Royale. A conventional farce about a mock marriage is clothed with persuasive merry-go-round antics in Washington diplomatic circles and the humor has a captivating momentum. Since the piece was written for her, it is eminently fitting that Celeste Holm gives it the chief fillips of amusement, but the production is well served throughout.

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From a purely technical standpoint "Affairs of State" is a work of virtuosity. Once he has established the somewhat preposterous situation of having a schoolteacher marry an up and coming statesman for expedience, Verneuil keeps it in a delicate and delightful balance. On one hand there are an elderly retired secretary of state who engineers the alliance to keep his wife from leaving him and an amorously confused senator. On the other are an errant wife and one in name only. The notion is expanded far more racily than one might have imagined possible, while the dramatist has probed below his thin plot surface to create engaging characters and pertinent observations on politics and l'amour.

Miss Holm takes enchanting charge of the proceedings from her first entrance. With her wide-eyed innocent stare, she makes the somewhat dowdy hired hand in a marital partnership a person of warmth, charm and elusive motivations. Her quick switches from the loving wife she is supposed to represent to a secretary taking orders are brilliantly turned and her tug of war with an aunt who is her rival finds her magnificently feline. The star has tremendous support from Reginald Owen, who has returned from Hollywood with her after far too long an absence. His performance is quietly scintillating, making lines crackle and bits of business take on fine theatrical consequence. As the retired secretary who remembers his diplomatic cunning in stopping his middle-aged wife's affair, he is superb.

Shepperd Strudwick has a somewhat thankless part as the befuddled senator who is jockeyed into happiness by his astute superior and a crafty young woman, but he modulates his performance nicely. So does Barbara O'Neil in the role of the wife who loses out with a forced smile. Quite a bit of "Affairs of State" is forced, in addition to the contrived opening scene. But there is enough substance to the farce to tempt one to overlook its essential hollowness. And there is gaily polished acting to give the Verneuil conceit reasonable meaning, animation and a rich fund of laughter. The author has staged his play with the same perception that he has composed it, capitalizing on all its brightest facets.

Journal American

September 26, 1950

A Gay, Pleasant Play And Celeste Is Grand

By JIM O'CONNOR

A nice state of affairs existed last evening in the Royale Theatre, where "Affairs of State," with Celeste Holm in the top post, opened proceedings.

The matter under consideration resolved itself into a sophisticated comedy of romantic plot and counter-plot, competently cast, enjoyably acted and enlivened liberally with laughs.

Featured in Louis Verneuil's new play, starring Miss Holm, are Reginald Owen, Barbara O'Neil, Shepperd Strudwick and Harry Bannister. All are good. But Celeste is best.

The scene is Washington.

Involved are an ex-Secretary of State (Owen), a Democrat, who is not as dumb as most people seem to think most Secretaries of State are; a crusading Republican Senator (Strudwick), who is not as brilliant as many people, including himself, think he is; a quiet, shy, retiring school teacher (Celeste Holm) who proves herself a master maneuverer in love and politics; and a plotting wife (Barbara O'Neil) who meets her match in the third act.

Yet, this is not a comedy about politics in the usual sense. Nor is it a play with a message and a cause. There is no resemblance, so far as I know, to any public official living or dead.

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A Topical Comedy

It's merely a smart, topical comedy about a rather unusual triangle, set in present day official Washington. And a merry light comedy, at that.

Of course, there is deep intrigue; tricky deals are made, double-crossers are double-crossed. But it's all for love.

To stress the topical touch, there are references to President Truman, Bess and Margaret, Senator Taft, Eleanor Roosevelt, Vice-President Barkley, Cordell Hull, Senator Vandenberg and Vishinsky.

The surprising thing is that a Frenchman, Verneuil, could write such a knowing play about official Washington. He directed the production at the Royale, too. It's his first American job.

The affairs in "Affairs of State" concern a middle-aged wife of an elderly retired Secretary of State who wants to divorce him because she has fallen in love with a middle-aged Senator, a handsome bachelor, who is a political protege of the elder statesman.

The ex-Secretary still loves his wife; wants to keep her. So he does some high-class low-down scheming himself. He suggests the Senator should get himself a wife, if for no other reason than to further his political career.

The Senator talks it over with the statesman's wife and they agree to the plan—provided the marriage of convenience lasts only until she can divorce the statesman and wed the Senator.

On the scene appears the niece of the wife of the former Secretary of State. The Senator hires her as his temporary bride and . . .

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Holm, Sweet Holm

Well, I'm not going to reveal the whole plot. But out of all the skulduggery and trickery and woman-against-woman stuff emerges Celeste Holm—flashing her teeth, twinkling her eyes, blonde, intelligent, appealing, triumphant, beautiful, charming, serene and supreme. Holm, sweet Holm!

Of course, this plot—or a reasonable facsimile thereof—has been used by playwrights from time to time through the years.

Last night, in "Affairs of State," it wasn't what they did—but how they did it. And they did it very well, indeed.

Reginald Owen, back on stage after 18 years in the movies, was outstanding as the sly, distinguished former Secretary of State. And Barbara O'Neil was exceedingly effective as his dissatisfied wife.

As the apex of the triangle, Shepperd Strudwick was appropriately weak in the hands of two clever, scheming women.

The dialogue was mostly bright, if not brilliant. The single setting by Paul Morrison was attractive and the gowns designed by Dorothy Jeakins beautiful.

I'm not just being diplomatic when I state that I found "Affairs of State" in good state. It's a pleasant play—gay all the way.

The New York Times

September 26, 1950

Celeste Holm Makes Debut as Star in Louis Verneuil's 'Affairs of State'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

In the course of a long and persevering career, Louis Verneuil has written a number of plays, and "Affairs of State," which was put on at the Royale last evening, is one of them. For purposes of the American trade, which declines to take farces seriously, he labels it "comedy" and offers it as a vehicle for Celeste Holm, who, as everyone expected, gives an excellent performance.

Although M. Verneuil has been living in America for ten years and manages to decorate his play with an American ex-Secretary of State, the Secretary of State and the new Under-Secretary of State, he has not forgotten his Parisian manners, and he writes as though nothing had happened since "The Canary" and "The Love Habit."

* * *

The wife of the aging ex-Secretary of State is secretly in love with a young Senator, who is a bachelor. Since the Senator needs a wife for purposes of political respectability, she installs her husband's niece in that post to hold the franchise until she is free to marry him herself. If you remember how farces used to go a quarter of a century ago, the niece is to be wife in name only, and you can giggle nervously over the pleasures she and he are missing.

If you know anything about the philosophy of the theatre, you also know after about ten minutes of the first act that the young senator and his wife-in-name-only are going to fall in love with each other at the final curtain. For there is one paradoxical thing about the cosmopolitan drama: it is as innocent as Cinderella and Mother Goose.

* * *

M. Verneuil goes through the proper motions with practiced ease. He delivers epigrams about marriage and politics. He pays compliments to the ladies dexterously. He introduces terrific political personages, and settles affairs of state with elegance and speed. Everyone is so very expert, shrewd and genteel. The living room, designed by Paul Morrison, is stately and gracious, equipped with books and a bar, and lacking only a fireplace and a stairway. The costumes, designed by Dorothy Jeakins, are expensive and ravishing.

To many, perhaps to most, members of the first-night audience, these materials appeared to be bright enough for pleasure and ironic enough for amusement. Let M. Verneuil say, "Marriage is like, etc," and the audience shouted with delight, often applauding the wittiest of the apothegms. But to one unhappy member of the audience, "Affairs of State" seemed like the tired replaying of an old record; and M. Verneuil's romantic interludes, founded on such specious exposition, seemed embarrassing.

Miss Holm has been all right for a long time, and she is all right now. She makes an honest, though unsuccessful, attempt to look ugly and dull in the first act, when she is supposed to be an inconsequential secretary; and she becomes progressively more scintillating as the evening advances. Being an intelligent girl, she could act this part with her eyes closed, but since her eyes are very lively, she has the good taste to keep them open.

After a long absence in Hollywood, Reginald Owen has returned to play the Ex-Secretary of State with the white hair and the disingenuous mind. In the old days Mr. Owen used to be a dry and sardonic actor, but isn't he a little on the unctuous side now? Shepperd Strudwick plays the naive young Senator with a soft charm that is fine for the farce but does not augur well for the future of our country. Harry Bannister, as the Secretary of State, is courtly without being stuffy. As the middle-aged wife of the aging Ex-Secretary, Barbara O'Neil has an extraordinarily odious part to play, and comes through it as painlessly as possible.

Miss Holm looks as fresh as the beautiful morning they used to celebrate when she was playing in "Oklahoma!" M. Verneuil is not writing that way at all.

New York World-Telegram and The ~~Herald~~ Sun

September 26, 1950

'Affairs of State' In Tiptop Order

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Bland indoor comedy.
Topic—Expedient marriage.
Plot—Antique but trusty.
Mood—Unruffling; benevolent.
Cast—Tip-top drawer.
I find it—Most congenial.

Anything written about "Affairs of State" is likely to be misleading. Most of its virtues would be faults if the production were one whit less professional. But it is cunning and civilized theater.

To do quickly away with the story, a Senator who loves a matron marries a school teacher in name only. It takes neither me nor a sledge hammer to add that the teacher wins his love. Twists on this gimmick have been dramatized since the beginning of time. The most familiar is "What Every Woman Knows," to which "Affairs of State" bears a remarkable narrative resemblance.

Wealth of Cliches.

This new version is written with a wealth of cliches. The plotting is slick, so pat it delineates its entire route in the first few minutes. The jokes send ahead tracers. It is an evening, for the most part, of fond anticipation with nary a whiff of suspense.

Just what makes this production so endearing is difficult to say. Its sense of knowing, and acting like, exactly what it is, becomes an infinite virtue. Louis Verneuil's craftsmanship, as author and director, is sophisticated to the point of being just one hop ahead of decadence. Except for a limp, extended second act, every possible leak is expertly plugged.

And the cast is certainly a joy.

Celeste Holm is starred, as the school teacher, of course, and does a winning job. The role is perforated with invitations to go cute, all but one of which she resists. Sometimes the lines seem almost too tailored to her unique inflections, but she wears the speeches well, as she markedly does, too, her dresses.

Heart of the Play.

In some senses the heart of the play is Reginald Owen as the ex-Secretary of State who plots and counterplots this whole contrivance. It is a wonderfully mellow, deceptively mild performance, with an effortlessly achieved quality that is both cherubic and elite.

Barbara O'Neil is likely to miss the attention she deserves for her graceful portrait of the presumptuous woman who loses.

Geared to Times.

Shepperd Strudwick is handsome and harassed as the pawn of the female plotting, and Harry Bannister makes an ingratiating character of a diplomatic politician.

Sometimes this comedy seems outrageously superficial in its chatter of current events, yet contemporary themes give it a superficial blush of modernity.

Sooner or later you will assure yourself that it is impossible in this day and age for those people up there to be doing so exactly what you knew they intended. It is like opening next month's Flair to find it reprinting "Graustark."